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D'Amato: CIA 'inept' in pope investigation

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Sen. Alfonse D'Amato on a possible cover-up of the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II.

Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, R-N.Y., recently returned here following a visit to Rome as part of the Helsinki Commission. While in Rome, he discovered that information regarding the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II was never forwarded to investigators in Rome, even though D'Amato says he gave that information to the CIA in October 1981. This apparent negligence on the part of the intelligence community prompted D'Amato to criticize publically the CIA for its handling of the matter, even suggesting that they may in fact be trying to cover up the truth for their own purposes.

The senator was interviewed by Washington Times columnist John Lofton.

Q: Sen. D'Amato, you charged the CIA, which is our intelligence agency, with covering up the facts in the plot to murder the pope. What is your evidence to support this very serious allegation?

A: I think what we find is a total lack of dedication in ascertaining the facts so that the public can make an informed judgment. In addition, we find in many instances misinformation that has been given out by various intelligence sources — the kind of information that has proved to be very discouraging to the Italian government and to those charged with carrying out this investigation.

Q: You, in effect, said that the CIA was engaging in a campaign of disinformation. What kind of disinformation?

A: Well, for example, when certain intelligence sources are used by the national media as their sources for indicating that Agca, and his reliability — Agca being the young Turk who attempted to assassinate the pope — that he was mentally deranged and that information is attributed to an intelligence source, a CIA source, that provokes, No. 1 — great consternation within the Italian intelligence community and obviously begins to discredit the theory and the investigation.

Q: Could you give us some more specifics? ... what has the CIA not done that it should have done and what would be an example of where, in addition to what you just said, the agency has put out information that was erroneous? Why in the world they want to cover up this crime?

A: Well, again, I don't believe that it's the official position, I don't believe it's the position that comes from, let's say, CIA Director William Casey. I've spoken to the director and I am convinced of their good intentions but I think we have certain operatives in the field who have engaged in this kind of speculation with respect to the integrity of the Italian investigation and I could give you a number of instances.

Q: You, in effect, accused Casey of at least being negligent or not pursuing these leads you say exist. You also met with him. How did you get along after making that allegation?

A: Well, I think that the director is doing all in his power at this time. I came away with a sense that this matter has been discussed at the highest levels. I also understand why the CIA may not want to be out front. I don't believe that it should.

Q: But wasn't he ticked off at your allegations at that he basically was doing an inept job?

A: Well, I think that there are people out in the field who have done a less-than-adequate job.

Q: I don't understand why any CIA employee would try to cover up information dealing with what is arguably the crime of the century.

A: Well, let me give you a couple of facts that I ascertained and that deeply distressed me. I found out, for example, that there was not a high priority assigned to this particular matter, that indeed, there were, for example the exportation of atomic weapons, etc., was higher, that the Libyans were higher, that the transfer of technical equipment was assigned a higher priority, for example.

Q: Didn't I see you quoted in the newspaper as saying that there was an official at the Rome embassy — a CIA official — who told you that there wasn't one CIA person working on this case? Can that be true?

A: That's correct. And that is true. And, of course, now they say well, you really didn't understand what he said. That really there were seven people over there. He told me — quote-unquote — we don't have anyone specifically assigned. All of our agents have their ears to the ground. But I think more shocking is the fact that here, at this late date, they cannot — the CIA cannot — determine whether or not Antonov, the Bulgarian who was arrested, was an agent or not.

Now that is ludicrous. For us not to be able to form an opinion with respect to this Bulgarian, with respect to his activities, whether or not he was an agent? That that question would still be in doubt is something that I find hard to believe.

Q: You met with National Security Adviser William Clark and what did he say about all the things you've said in the press as well as here?

A: I went even further with the judge. There were certain matters which I have not revealed to the press

— information that we were able to gather from various ...

Q: You don't want to do it here?

A: Well, no, I'm afraid if I wouldn't do it before, I certainly wouldn't do it now but I did.

Q: Well, that's a silly rule, Senator, I mean you could reveal it with the others, no problem with that... You ought to be dogmatic, really.

A: Let me suggest to you that there also has been an attempt to say that I've looked to capitalize on publicity with regard to this matter and I say, let's look at the record. I came into possession of information which indicated a possible motive back in October 1981.

Q: This is when you went to Rome and met with Vatican officials?

A: When I went to Rome, I met with certain Vatican officials. I did not make that information public. I did not go to the press. I did not hold a press conference. I gave that information to the CIA. And I have to admit to you, I was deeply distressed when I just learned — talk about ineptness — that that information I gave to certain officials here had never been transmitted to ascertain the truth or falsehood of the information to the people in the field in Rome.

Q: But aren't you encouraged now that the president, right after your meeting with William Clark — that very night was at a dinner before conservatives and the president went out of his way to, in effect, say we are full-square behind the Italians — weren't you encouraged by that?

A: I think it will be much more difficult for some of the lower-level operatives in the field to discourage and to cast doubt upon the integrity of the investigation and the necessity for this investigation to be carried out.

Q: Are they that politically inept at the White House that they do not know the serious political implications of the investigation you've been pursuing?

A: I think that for many months, indeed, for almost a year, there were very few people who were aware including the press and those at the White House of the possibilities that existed in connection with this matter. That it was put off. You know, initially, there was a warrant that charged Agca and others with this attempted assassination and it was changed. Agca was convicted as the only person and it was only as a result of a very courageous judge who, at the end of the trial, in spite of all of the shenanigans that had taken place, who came forth and said this man did not act alone.

Q: I'm listening very hard and I don't mean to belabor the point, but I'm not hearing why it is you think that this cover-up has occurred. Now you were quoted by the Reuters news agency as saying that it's obvious that the CIA would like the investigation of the pope dropped. What is the motive for this behavior?

A: I think there is a change in attitude at the present time.

Q: Why would they have ever wanted it dropped?

A: I think that there were people out in the field who never believed that this was the case. Secondly, they were embarrassed that after months and months it first came to light. I think they've gone on record reporting back to Washington that there was no Bulgarian connection and that indeed, there was no KGB connection and I think we find a whole host of ineptitude out in that field.

Q: Well, you know that I think you know what I think we have here. We have a typical case of the liberal media and the establishment finding themselves incapable of saying anything kind that might implicate that the Soviets may very well be in the business of trying to assassinate a pope.

A: That's true. I think there are some people who have a great deal of difficulty recognizing that if indeed

that were the fact, that the American public and the free world should know about that. Now, I'm not saying that that was the fact but I'm saying — I have raised to people — I've said, tell me, what is the reasonable alternative if indeed Agca did not act with the help of the Bulgarians, then what was the reasonable alternative? Why was Antonov there? How could he identify these people? And you know the fact of the matter is that Antonov, the Bulgarian who has been arrested, has been identified in other matters, that the Bulgarians indeed were engaged in the business of espionage, viewing Italy as the very soft underbelly of NATO and that it was not directed simply at an Italian citizen. This was considered.

Q: It sounds like a situation which cries out for some sort of investigation. Are you planning to urge any sort of congressional investigation of how the CIA should handle this? Should the Senate Intelligence Committee get involved in it?

A: I believe that the Senate Intelligence Committee has asked the appropriate questions. I do believe that at the present time the CIA is back on track.

Q: Are they going to testify? Should they testify?

A: Well, they have.

Q: They have? Even if this is a closed session?

A: Yeah, well, I think it should be in closed session and certain of the facts are of a sensitive nature and certain of the communications.

Q: Oh yeah, it sounds to me like you might be backtracking a little bit and saying that maybe some of the things you said earlier — that they no longer apply. I mean, you're talking about this subject relatively freely here but didn't Bill Casey, the head of the CIA, basically tell you that he would prefer that you would just shut up about this?

A: Well, no, he didn't suggest that and I think Bill Casey knows me for a long enough time to understand that I would not do that.

Q: Weren't you told that it really is not in the national interest for you to talk about about this kind of thing and that there are things that you don't know?

A: No, I have to tell you that that was never suggested to me.

Q: Well, what did you say — "I'll keep slugging?"

A: No, I think that they probably understand that had they indicated that to me, I would have made it public. I would have indicated right here that I was told that I should not speak out on this matter and what I'm speaking out for is to say that people have a right to the facts.

Q: I agree. You know, I cannot recall a time when the Soviets failed to implicate and insinuate that ever since the assassination of President Kennedy, that somehow LBJ's people were involved in this, in other words, they played that propaganda banjo interminably, and now suddenly the Soviets are up in arms. They're threatening NBC with expulsion because they basically substantiated many of the things that you've found. How do you view the Soviet attitude. No. 1, and also No. 2 what's your view of the press's attitude towards this whole thing?

A: I think the press is somewhat embarrassed, because there were so few people and those who did raise the possibility of the kind of complicity that we're now beginning to find.

Q: The great heroes of Watergate?

A: Well, that's right. And they should be ashamed of themselves for the lack of activity and now some are coming to the fore. I think NBC should be congratulating Marvin Cobb. The facts are that there is a Bulgarian connection. I think in the fullness of time that will be established, (but) not beyond a reasonable doubt.